

Sunday 5th November 2017: TWENTY-SECOND SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST.
YR A.

Readings: Joshua 3:7-17; Ps 107:1-7,33-37; 1Thessalonians 4:1-8

Gospel: Matthew 23:1-12(37-39)

“Jesus warns against following the example of the scribes and the Pharisees and teaches that those who would be great must be servants.”

A woman goes to the post office to buy stamps for Christmas.
She says to the clerk, "May I have 50 Christmas stamps?"

The clerk says, "What denomination?"

The woman says, "God help us. Has it come to this?
Give me 6 Catholic, 12 Presbyterian, 10 Lutheran and 22 Baptists."

May I speak in the Name of the One God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

Today's Gospel continues to elaborate on the tension between Jesus and the scribes and Pharisees. Our Lectionary sequence at this point, however, is not quite a continuous reading of Matthew. In between last week's reading from Matthew and this week's, we find Jesus' question to the Pharisees about the Messiah being "David's son." Having concluded a series of dialogues with the Pharisees and other religious leaders, Jesus now directs his words to the crowds, warning them not to follow the example of the scribes and Pharisees.

The scribes and Pharisees were teachers of the Mosaic Law. They were entrusted with its interpretation and, thus, were influential in determining Jewish practice. In order to appreciate the conflict that is evident in this passage, we must understand that Jesus was basing his teachings on the same laws and traditions available to the Pharisees. Both were interpreting the Law of Moses to better adapt it to contemporary Jewish life. The differences between their teachings, therefore, are often highlighted and amplified by Matthew.

This part of Matthew's Gospel reflects aspects of the conflict between his Christian community and Pharisaic Judaism. Matthew's Church is thought to have included many Jewish Christians who may not have believed that a break with the synagogue

was necessary to be a follower of Jesus.

Jesus tells the crowd that it is correct to do and observe what the scribes and Pharisees teach; it is their example that is to be avoided, namely, their love of being honoured and exalted. Hence, the Gospel reflects the tension of an active internal debate within the early Church.

Jesus, speaking to His followers, said, "But he who is greatest among you shall be your servant" (v. 11).

The scribes and Pharisees were not concerned about serving anyone. Though their position in society was given to them as a ministry of service, they used it to make themselves "great" in the eyes of the people. They were seeking to be thought "superior" through their public displays of religious devotion. By their actions, they showed that what they really wanted was that the people of God serve them.

And that made all their professed devotion to God as His "servants" to be mere hypocrisy.

But Jesus, by His own example, made it impossible to make mere outward religious performance a gage of true greatness. He once told His disciples;

“You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as ransom for many” (Matthew 20:25-28).

No one stooped down as low, in humble service, as our Saviour did. "taking the form of a bond servant, and coming in the likeness of men", He "humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death on the cross" (Philippians 2:7-8). And no one is exalted higher than He.

That's the path of "greatness" in our Lord's kingdom my friends, —humble service in His name. But the danger of mere outward religious performance is that it can delude us into thinking that we have elevated ourselves into "greatness" in God's sight.

The warning Jesus gives against seeking places of honour in the community was directed as much towards the Christian community, as the named Jewish leaders. Indeed, it is a warning that resonates with us today. Christian leadership is a call to service for the glory of God; those who would be leaders among us must like Jesus, be servants of all.

And Jesus goes on to warn that "whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted"

Amen.

